Language And The Study Of Language: Twelve Lectures On The Principles Of Linguistic Science

William Dwight Whitney

LANGUAGE

AND

THE STUDY OF LANGUAGE

TWELVE LECTURES

ON THE

PRINCIPLES OF LINGUISTIC SCIENCE

BY

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To

JAMES HADLEY

PROFESSOR OF GREEK IN YALE COLLEGE

THIS FRUIT OF STUDIES WHICH HE HAS DONE MORE

THAN ANY ONE ELSE TO ENCOURAGE AND AID

IS AFFECTIONATELY INSCRIBED

PREFACE.

The main argument of the following work was first drawn out in the form of six lectures "On the Principles of Linguistic Science," delivered at the Smithsonian Institution, in Washington, during the month of March, 1864. Of these, a brief abstract was printed in the Annual Report of the Institution published in the same year.* In the following winter (December, 1864, and January, 1865) they were again delivered as one of the regular courses before the Lowell Institute, in Boston, having been expanded into a series of twelve lectures. They are now laid before a wider public, essentially in their form as there presented. But they have been in the mean time carefully rewritten, and have suffered a not inconsiderable further expansion, as the removal of the enforced Procrustean limit, of sixty minutes to a lecture, has given opportunity to discuss with greater fulness important points in the general argument which had before come off with insufficient treatment. The chief matter of theory upon which my opinion has undergone any noteworthy modification is the part to be attributed to the onomatopoetic principle in the first steps of language-making (see the eleventh lecture). To this principle, at each revision

* Report for 1863, pp. 95—116.

of my views, I have been led to assign a higher and higher efficiency, partly by the natural effect of a deeper study and clearer appreciation of the necessary conditions of the case, partly under the influence of valuable works upon the subject, recently issued.* In the general style of presentation I have not thought it worth while to make any change—not even to cast out those recapitulations and repetitions which are well-nigh indispensable in a course of lectures meant for oral delivery, though they may and should be avoided in a work intended from the outset for continuous reading and study.

More than one of the topics here treated have been from time to time worked up separately, as communications to the American Oriental Society, and are concisely reported in its Proceedings; also, within no long time past, I have furnished, by request, to one or two of our leading literary periodicals, papers upon special themes in linguistic science which were, to no small extent, virtual extracts from this work.

The principal facts upon which my reasonings are founded have been for some time past the commonplaces of comparative philology, and it was needless to refer for them to any particular authorities: where I have consciously taken results recently won by an individual, and to be regarded as his property, I have been careful to acknowledge it. It is, however, my duty and my pleasure here to confess my special obligations to those eminent masters in linguistic science, Professors Heinrich Steinthal of Berlin and August Schleicher of Jena, whose works †

* I will refer only to Mr Farrar's "Chapters on Language" (London, 1865), and to Professor Wedgwood's little book, "On the Origin of Language" (London, 1866).

† As chief among them, I would mention Steinthal's "Charakteristik der

I have had constantly upon my table, and have freely consulted, deriving from them great instruction and enlightenment, even when I have been obliged to differ most strongly from some of their theoretical views. Upon them I have been dependent, above all, in preparing my eighth and ninth lectures;* my independent acquaintance with the languages of various type throughout the world being far from sufficient to enable me to describe them at first hand. I have also borrowed here and there an illustration from the "Lectures on the Science of Language" of Professor Max Müller, which are especially rich in such material.

To my friend Professor Fitz-Edward Hall, Librarian of the East India Office in London, I have to return my thanks for his kindness in undertaking the burdensome task of reading the revise of the sheets, as they went through the press.

It can hardly admit of question that at least so much knowledge of the nature, history, and classifications of language as is here presented ought to be included in every scheme of higher education, even for those who do not intend to become special students in comparative philology. Much more necessary, of course, is it to those who cherish such an intention. It is, I am convinced, a mistake to commence at once upon a course of detailed comparative philology with pupils who have only enjoyed the ordinary training in the classical or the modern languages,

Hauptsächlichsten Typen des Sprachbaues" (Berlin, 1860), and Schleicher's "Compendium der Vergleichenden Grammatik der Indogermanischen Sprachen" (Weimar, 1861; a new edition has appeared this year): other writings of both authors, of less extent and importance, are referred to by name in the marginal notes upon the text.

* I should mention also my indebtedness, as regards the Semitic languages, to the admirable work of M. Ernest Renan, the "Histoire Générale des Langues Sémitiques" seconde édition, Paris, 1858).

or in both. They are liable either to fail of apprehending the value and interest of the infinity of particulars into which they are plunged, or else to become wholly absorbed in them, losing sight of the grand truths and principles which underlie and give significance to their work, and the recognition of which ought to govern its course throughout: perhaps even coming to combine with acuteness and erudition in etymological investigation views respecting the nature of language and the relations of languages of a wholly crude or fantastic character. I am not without hope that this book may be found a convenient and serviceable manual for use in our higher institutions of learning. I have made its substance the basis of my own instruction in the science of language, in Yale College, for some years past; and, as it appears to me, with gratifying success. In order to adapt it to such a purpose, I have endeavoured to combine a strictly logical and scientific plan with a popular mode of handling, and with such illustration of the topics treated as should be easily and universally apprehensible. If, however, the lecture style should be found too discursive and argumentative for a text-book of instruction, I may perhaps be led hereafter to prepare another work for that special use.

YALE COLLEGE,
New Haven, Conn.,
August, 1867.

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LANGUAGE

AND

THE STUDY OF LANGUAGE.

LECTURE I.

Introductory: history, material, objects of linguistic science; plan of these lectures. Fundamental inquiry. How we acquired our speech, and what it was; differences of individual speech. What is the English language; how kept in existence; its changes. Modes and causes of linguistic change.

Those who are engaged in the investigation of language have but recently begun to claim for their study the rank and title of a science. Its development as such has been wholly the work of the present century, although its germs go back to a much more ancient date. It has had a history, in fact, not unlike that of the other sciences of observation and induction—for example, geology, chemistry, astronomy, physics—which the intellectual activity of modern times has built up upon the scanty observations and crude inductions of other days. Men have always been learning languages, in greater or less measure; adding to their own mother-tongues the idioms of the races about them, for the practical end of communication with those races, of access to their thought and knowledge. There has, too, hardly been a time when some have not been led on from the acquisition of languages to the study of language. The interest of this precious and wonderful possession of man, at once the sign and the means of his superiority to the rest of the animal

creation, has in all ages strongly impressed the reflecting and philosophical, and impelled them to speculate respecting its nature, its history, and its origin. Researches into the genealogies and affinities of words have exercised the ingenuity of numberless generations of acute and inquiring minds. Moreover, the historical results attainable by such researches, the light cast by them upon the derivation and connection of races, have never wholly escaped recognition. The general objects and methods of linguistic study are far too obviously suggested, and of far too engaging interest, not to have won a certain share of regard, from the time when men first began to inquire into things and their causes.

Nothing, however, that deserved the name of a science was the result of these older investigations in the domain of language, any more than in those of chemistry and astronomy. Hasty generalizations, baseless hypotheses, inconclusive deductions, were as rife in the former department of study as they were in the two latter while yet passing through the preliminary stages of alchemy and astrology. The difficulty was in all the cases nearly the same; it lay in the paucity of observed facts, and in the faulty position which the inquirer assumed toward them. There had been no sufficient collection and classification of phenomena, to serve as the basis of inductive reasoning, for the establishment of sound methods and the elaboration of true results; and along with this, and partly in consequence of it, prejudice and assumption had usurped the place of induction. National self-sufficiency and inherited prepossession long helped to narrow the limits imposed by unfavourable circumstances upon the extent of linguistic knowledge, restraining that liberality of inquiry which is indispensable to the growth of a science. Ancient peoples were accustomed to think each its own dialect the only true language; other tongues were to them mere barbarous jargons, unworthy of study. Modern nations, in virtue of their history, their higher culture, and their Christianity, have been much less uncharitably exclusive; and their reverence for the two classical idioms, the Greek and Latin, and for the language of the Old Testament, the He-

brew, so widened their linguistic horizon as gradually to prepare the way for juster and more comprehensive views of the character and history of human speech. The restless and penetrating spirit of investigation, finally, of the nineteenth century, with its insatiable appetite for facts, its tendency to induction, and its practical recognition of the unity of human interests, and of the absolute value of all means of knowledge respecting human conditions and history, has brought about as rapid a development in linguistic study as in the kindred branches of physical study to which we have already referred. The truth being once recognized that no dialect, however rude and humble, is without worth, or without a bearing upon the understanding of even the most polished and cultivated tongues, all that followed was a matter of course. Linguistic material was gathered in from every quarter, literary, commercial, and philanthropic activity combining to facilitate its collection and thorough examination. Ancient records were brought to light and deciphered; new languages were dragged from obscurity and made accessible to study.

The recognition, not long to be deferred when once attention was turned in the right direction, of the special relationship of the principal languages of Europe with one another and with the languages of south-western Asia—the establishment of the Indo-European family of languages—was the turning-point in this history, the true beginning of linguistic science. The great mass of dialects of the family, descendants of a common parent, covering a period of four thousand years with their converging lines of development, supplied just the ground which the science needed to grow up upon, working out its methods, getting fully into view its ends, and devising the means of their attainment. The true mode of fruitful investigation was discovered; it appeared that a wide and searching comparison of kindred idioms was the way in which to trace out their history, and arrive at a real comprehension of the life and growth of language. Comparative philology, then, became the handmaid of ethnology and history, the forerunner and founder of the science of human speech.

No single circumstance more powerfully aided the onward movement than the introduction to Western scholars of the Sanskrit, the ancient and sacred dialect of India. Its exceeding age, its remarkable conservation of primitive material and forms, its unequalled transparency of structure, give it an indisputable right to the first place among the tongues of the Indo-European family. Upon their comparison, already fruitfully begun, it cast a new and welcome light, displaying clearly their hitherto obscure relations, rectifying their doubtful etymologies, illustrating the laws of research which must be followed in their study, and in that of all other languages. What linguistic science might have become without such a basis as was afforded it in the Indo-European dialects, what Indo-European philology might have become without the help of the Sanskrit, it were idle to speculate; certain it is that they could not have grown so rapidly, or reached for a long time to come the state of advancement in which we now already behold them. As a historical fact, the scientific study of human speech is founded upon the comparative philology of the Indo-European languages, and this acknowledges the Sanskrit as its most valuable means and aid.

But to draw out in detail the history of growth of linguistic science down to the present time, with particular notice of its successive stages, and with due mention of the scholars who have helped it on, does not lie within the plan of these lectures. Interesting as the task might be found, its execution would require more time than we can spare from topics of more essential consequence.* A brief word or two is all we can afford to the subject. Germany is, far more than any other country, the birthplace and home of the study of language. There was produced, at the beginning of this century, the most extensive and important of the preliminary collections of material, specimens of dialects with rude attempt at their classification — the "Mithridates" of Adelung and Vater. There Jacob Grimm gave the first exemplification on a grand scale of the value and power of

* For many interesting details, see Professor Max Müller's Lectures on the Science of Language, first series, third and fourth lectures.

the comparative method of investigation in language, in his grammar of the Germanic dialects, a work of gigantic labour, in which each dialect was made to explain the history and character of all, and all of each. There—what was of yet greater consequence—Bopp laid, in 1816, the foundation of Indo-European comparative philology, by his "Conjugation-system of the Sanskrit Language, as compared with the Greek, Latin, Persian, and German;" following it later with his Comparative Grammar of all the principal languages of the Indo-European family—a work which, more than any other, gave shape and substance to the science. There, too, the labours of such men as the Schlegels, Pott, and Wilhelm von Humboldt, especially of the last-named, extended its view and generalized its principles, making it no longer an investigation of the history of a single department of human speech, but a systematic and philosophical treatment of the phenomena of universal language and their causes. The names of Rask, too, the Danish scholar and traveller, and of Burnouf, the eminent French *savant*, must not be passed unnoticed among those of the founders of linguistic science. Indeed, how ripe the age was for the birth of this new branch of human knowledge, how natural an outgrowth it was of the circumstances amid which it arose, is shown by the fact that its most important methods were worked out and applied, more or less fully, at nearly the same time, by several independent scholars, of different countries—by Rask, Bopp, Grimm, Pott, Burnouf.

A host of worthy rivals and followers of the men whose names we have noted have arisen in all parts of Europe, and even in America, to continue the work which these had begun; and by their aid the science has already attained a degree of advancement that is truly astonishing, considering its so recent origin. Though still in its young and rapidly growing stage, with its domain but just surveyed and only partially occupied, its basis is yet laid broadly and deeply enough, its methods and laws are sure enough, the objects it aims at and the results it is yielding are sufficiently important, in themselves and in their bearing upon other branches of human knowledge, to warrant it in challenging a place